

Bottom Dollar (Top Dollar On a Budget)

by Lt Colonel Roger A. Bick

How many of you remember the TV show Combat? As you may recall, Vic Morrow was the star of that series which portrayed a seasoned WWII Army platoon in the midst of the European ground war. Vic was the quintessential NCO; in fact, he and his ruffians were able to dodge more machine gun fire without taking casualties than any group ever to see action. Every once in a while, an unknown guy in his outfit would take a hit, but by and large, Vic had everything under control. As I halfheartedly gazed at one of Vic's Com-

bat escapades the other night, I couldn't help but recall our squadron's delve into simulated combat as we joined the 823rd Red Horse squadron in their combined war games. My squadron got a lot out of that experience. We had honed our wartime skills, practiced bare-base financial procedures, had some fun, and one thing was for sure—we definitely wanted more!



However, being in Air Force Special Operations Command, our exposure to other Top Dollar team events was limited because we were essentially a one wing command, vis-a-vis one Financial Services office. Being a one wing show restricted our ability to garner intra-command cross-feed and we felt it put us at a disadvantage as we neared the Top Dollar competition. So what we did was enter the Top Dollar competition of other commands to retain our edge for the Air Force competition.

But as I reflected upon what we were doing, I was still inspired to do even more; especially as I watched Vic employ his combat savvy and take his “dream team” platoon through one German town after another. In a sort of half-conscience nostalgia I thought, if Vic can do it with that crew, so can we!

So before reality set in, my First Sergeant and I set out to put together a low-cost, finance-oriented, war game that would bridge the gap between the assets, staff, and experience of our larger MAJCOM competitors, and that of our overenthusiastic, ragtag group of 40.

Some of our self-imposed limitations included: it could not cost over \$100, it must be held during our morning PT time, everyone (civilians too!) must be allowed to participate, it must reinforce the self-aid/buddy care training we had just received, and it must be fun.



So with just a framework, a few bucks, and a grander vision of Combat proportions, we set out to have the first annual 16th CPTS war games. First thing we did was have a meeting during which we told key players what we were going to do, identified four team leaders, and four team evaluators. Team leaders were instructed to have a short follow-on meeting and pick their own teams from available personnel. Next we chose the location—base picnic grounds—and began plotting our war game strategy.

Then we looked at the time available and created nine stations each team would be required to process through. Each station presented something unique.

A couple of weeks before the game, we had e-mailed a simulated JCS Warning Order that put team leaders on notice as to the rules of the game. From there, we built station markers with laminated cards that instructed each team as to what to do when they reached that particular station. We accumulated role players from our civilian workforce, some volunteers, and a few military dependents. We created scenarios that challenged the team leaders both intellectually and physically.

Another big step was getting the medics involved. The Medical Group brought an ambulance to the grounds, a moulage technician, and a medical evaluator.

Ultimately, the stage was set for the big day. The object of the game was simply to get a pink card, representing an intelligence clue, at each of the nine stations. Some of the cards were positioned in the Santa Rosa Sound (you had to rent a canoe from a role playing merchant and paddle out to get yours), others were deep in the swamp guarded by hostile foreign nationals, while others were strategically located across toll bridges and up in some tall pine trees.

Special money was created to add realism and a financial challenge. Team leaders were given one US simulated treasury check, a mission statement, and a rule book. The morning of the event, commanders and their teams were provided a complete mission brief. Both the MAJCOM Comptroller and his deputy attended. The scenario unfolded in the fictitious country of Leftkaslovakia and many subtleties were purposefully injected into the mission brief which set the stage for team evaluation; then they were shown the location of the bank, handed their map, and they were off. They were confronted with foreign currency, foreign accounts, foreign nationals, counterfeit money, rip-off artists, etc.

Role players were only given a framework of what we wanted them to do, leaving the rest to their discretion. The results were phenomenal: that flexibility enabled them to personalize the team interface and added a unique dimension to the game. We had foreign nationals, unscrupulous bankers, irate landowners, press agents, merchants, hostile locals, and enemy agents. Role players could dress as they saw fit and were allowed to charge, as the market would bear.

Teams were briefed to be fiscally conservative and the “winner” was the team that balanced their cash and receipts, engaged the game with enthusiasm, and thought through the many nuances built into this low budget war game. We borrowed rubber M-16’s (very realistic) and had rules for prisoners-of-war, storage of simulated top secret, etc.

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Teams progressed through the nine stations in different sequences so that team play wouldn't stagnate. Those that didn't think through the "real world" consequences of their actions were often frustrated by having to return to the bank. Often they realized after they had completed an important step that they had erred and that their decision would have had catastrophic results had they made it in a real world environment.

Overall, I think Vic Morrow would have been proud and I am confident that the men and women of the 16th CPTS are better off for having dedicated a couple of hours to the first annual Comptroller war games. If you are interested in putting something like this together, it will probably cost your squadron about \$50 - \$75, require about five meetings, a Sunday afternoon or two, and some post-TV thought. I can only guarantee this: if you do it, the team spirit and camaraderie that it inspires will be more than worth the time spent putting it together.

We had a big awards ceremony a week or so later where we announced the top "bottom dollar" team and evaluators briefed the idiosyncrasies that team leaders should have been concentrating on during the game play. This reinforced the teaching points within a team building environment. As digitized pictures of events flashed in the background, each team leader introduced his team and proudly came forward to receive his/her award. Pride, team spirit, and unit cohesiveness momentarily replaced the drudgery of voucher processing and nearly everyone went away with a sense that we had accomplished something, by ourselves, that may mean a lot in our future.

Clearly, this type of event is not meant to be a replacement for the Air Force Top Dollar competition—just something you can do to get your team pumped up for it. I assure you of one thing—we in Air Force Special Operations Command are more ready for Top Dollar than we were before "Bottom Dollar"—all us in the 16th CPTS hope you will give us a call if you would like to do something like this with your Comptroller Squadron, otherwise, Vic, myself, and all our AFSOC warriors will see you at the next Air Force Top Dollar competition—we will be easy to recognize—we will be the ones with the trophy in our hands!



About the Author

Lt Col Roger Bick is the Commander, 16th Comptroller Squadron, Hurlburt Field FL. He took command of that squadron on 14 July 1997 after completing Air War College at Maxwell AFB AL. Previous assignments have included NATO Air Base Geilenkirchen GE where he served as the base Inspector General and Deputy Financial Comptroller. Additionally, he has served in SAF/FMBOS, HQ AETC, and as the Financial Services Officer at both Mather AFB CA and Keesler AFB MS. Lt Col Bick was selected the Financial Management & Comptroller of the Year for 1997.

